

Testimony of Jack A. Blackwell
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Before the
California Performance Review Commission

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Mr. Chairman and Commissioners:

Thank you for inviting me to speak today. It is an honor to have a chance to address the serious and complex issues that you are considering.

I endorse the overall effort of creating better efficiency in government, but would like to raise three very important issues that are under your public safety considerations and have important natural resource management implications.

The first issue is the ability of CDF and the U.S. Forest Service to remain the effective leaders of wildland community fire-protection services in California. This is a critical issue to me. As Regional Forester in California, I am responsible for the management of 20 percent of the state's land base. On a daily basis, I deal with California's complex fire-protection needs, both around communities and in the other wildland areas encompassing the 18 National Forests within the State. Our key partner is the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, who have even greater fire protection responsibilities within the State.

Your report outlines the key elements of emergency management, response, preparedness, recovery, and of hazard mitigation. I would like to underscore for you that CDF and Forest Service continue to lead the finest wildland fire-protection organizations in the

world. Together we have led a multi-agency organization that accomplishes all of your key elements.

For years we have worked together to achieve an interagency wildland fire-suppression organization that is a model for the rest of the nation. But it has become abundantly clear that the fire suppression job in California is not going to be won or lost with more people and equipment to respond to fire emergencies. Ultimately, success depends on treating fuels and reintroducing fire to play its traditional role in maintaining forests in a healthy condition. If CDF is fragmented into two organizations I am strongly concerned that fire suppression might become the dominant consideration at the expense of failing to deal with the root cause of our problem which is too much fuel.

For the last several years, CDF and the Forest Service have also been leading a new effort to help organize community fire-protection plans for the wildlands of California. This work is based on the California Fire Plan, the National Fire Plan, and the recently passed Healthy Forests Restoration Act. More than 125 community-based fire plans are under development today, thanks in part to work by CDF and Forest Service specialists in fire suppression, vegetation management and landscape analysis. Yet we know that over 1200 communities within the State are threatened by wildfire.

My second issue is that I am deeply concerned that changes to CDF could reduce or eliminate the ability of CDF to help lead community fire-protection planning work. It seems to me we need to ensure that local CDF units are not only staffed with personnel who can fight fire but also that they have the capacity to lead and provide technical support for local community fire-protection plans, conduct other pre-fire resource planning, and participate in post-fire recovery assessments.

I can tell you that the Forest Service does not have sufficient staff to fill the void if CDF loses its capacity to support community fire planning. If CDF does not retain this ability, community fire-protection planning will suffer statewide.

My third major issue concerns the national leadership role played by the Director of CDF. That individual also has the title of State Forester of California. Together with his other counterparts in the National Association of State Foresters, he helps set national policy in broad forestry and fire suppression matters.

In addition the State Forester and his key staff participate on national committees that determine the distribution of Federal forestry dollars to the States. These include dollars for projects as diverse as dealing with Sudden Oak Death to cooperative forest health protection funds. This funding goes up and down from year to year, but has averaged between \$10 - \$15 million dollars for the State of California in the recent past.

I am strongly concerned that if CDF were fragmented into two organizations it would not be clear which one would participate in helping the National Association of State Foresters conduct their important work. The state may have to send two people to national meetings of state foresters, one for forestry policy and one for firefighting policy; or California would only send one, and that individual may not have a full understanding of the other. Either way, I suspect that the state's high prestige and effectiveness within the organization would suffer. In my 36 years of experience in the Forest Service, I have not worked with a State that has split wildland fire suppression and forestry apart. The lesson nationally to me is these two programs need to be integrated.

I hope you will report that the Forest Service greatly values our existing strong partnership with CDF. I hope you will also report that I am deeply concerned that this strong partnership not be jeopardized for the reasons I have indicated.

This concludes my remarks. Thank you again for the opportunity to speak to you on these two important matters.